

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
HB 556/SB 516: CANNABIS BILL AMENDMENT
MARYLAND LEGAL SERVICES CORPORATION FUNDING
MARCH 9, 2023

POSITION: SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENT

The proposed amendment to HB 556/SB 516 would dedicate 10% of cannabis tax revenue to an existing Special Fund administered by the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC). Disability Rights Maryland (DRM, formerly known as Maryland Disability Law Center) is one of many grantees who rely on MLSC funding to provide vital legal services to Marylanders with disabilities, including residents of communities most impacted by the war on drugs and the disproportionate enforcement of the cannabis prohibition. MLSC is DRM's single largest funder.

DRM is the federally required, state designated Protection and Advocacy agency in Maryland, mandated to advance and protect the rights of people with disabilities throughout the state. We provide free legal services to Marylanders of any age with all types of disabilities (developmental, intellectual, psychiatric, physical, sensory, learning, traumatic brain injury, and more).

Marylanders with disabilities are often among the most economically disadvantaged and stigmatized. Many people are homeless, live in poverty, are isolated in facilities and tend to have increased health and other disability-related expenses coupled with limited opportunities to earn income. In Maryland, more than half of all people with disabilities had annual household incomes below \$15,000 in 2016.¹

With MLSC's funding, DRM provides a broad array of advocacy services focused on maintaining and increasing access to housing, education, health and mental health care, transportation, employment, community-based services and preventing abuse, neglect and discrimination.

In addition, multiple studies have shown that every dollar invested in civil legal services results in a \$6 return in the form of in economic activity, cost savings and increased productivity – a return of hundreds of millions of dollars each year.

¹ MD. DEP'T OF HEALTH, BRFSS BRIEF: DISABILITY AND HEALTH AMONG MARYLAND ADULTS (August 2018), https://health.maryland.gov/bhm/DHIP/Documents/BRFSS_BRIEF_2018-08_Disability.pdf.

One of many examples of DRM's services illustrates both the critical need and cost effectiveness of MLSC-funded services. DRM assisted a mother who considered reporting herself to Child Protective Services (CPS) in order to obtain care for her son, a youth with autism. Due to her medical conditions and need to work she could not provide the full time care her son needed. DRM stepped in and convinced the Developmental Disabilities Administration that the son should be eligible for services. As a result, the son was able to receive the in-home supports he needed and mother and son were able to continue to live safely in their home together, instead of the mother resorting to reporting herself to CPS and her son being placed in the full-time care of the state.

Over the past three years the demand for DRM's services has increased exponentially. At the same time, similar to many other MLSC funded organizations, DRM experienced significant staff turnover and difficulty recruiting qualified staff. Our salaries are not competitive with state government salaries and it has become increasingly difficult to retain and attract qualified staff.

It is vitally important to secure additional funding for MLSC to address this significant increase in demand for legal advocacy services. Therefore, we request the committee approve the proposed amendment to dedicate 10% of cannabis tax revenue to an existing Special Fund administered by the Maryland Legal Services Corporation (MLSC).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Committee on behalf of Disability Rights Maryland. I would be happy to provide any further information or answer questions, and can be reached at RobinM@DisabilityRightsMD.org.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robin C. Murphy".

Robin C Murphy
Executive Director, Disability Rights Maryland